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DE RUEHMR #0165/01 1421933  
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R 221933Z MAY 09  
FM AMEMBASSY MASERU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4178  
INFO RUCNSAD/SADC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHMR/AMEMBASSY MASERU 4605

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 MASERU 000165

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S, DS/IP/AF, AND INR/AF  
CAPE TOWN FOR SEEKER

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: PGOV ASEC LT

SUBJECT: ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT: MEDIA REVIEW

REF: A) Maseru 158 and previous    B) Maseru 142    C) Maseru 123

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Summary  
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¶1. In the May 14-20 issue of "The Monitor" weekly newspaper, a well-respected local columnist asks the question: "Is Lesotho a fertile breeding ground for international terrorism?" His points echo some of the Embassy's own concerns about security in the country, most forcefully brought to light by the involvement of foreigners in the recent attempted assassination of Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili. Last week's "Lesotho Times" front page headlines stated: "Mosisili Attack: Two ABC supporters arrested". This is just the latest of many articles over the past three weeks which have attempted to shed some light on the events that transpired during the early morning hours of April 22, 2009, at the Prime Minister's residence. While all newspapers, radio and television coverage have carried a similar version of the facts of the event, theories as to the perpetrators and possible suspects have been varied, and no one in the media seems to have any reliable source within the government of clear-cut information which could identify either culprit, motive, or opportunity.

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Should we be worried about Al Qaeda in this tiny country?

¶2. Monday's article in "The Monitor" was written by one of Lesotho's most experienced columnists. He is known to be an independent thinker, a staunch supporter of freedom of the press. The article is an opinion piece, pointing out first that Lesotho has all the prerequisites for facilitating the growth of terrorist elements, such as "porous borders, corrupt, and easily bribed immigration officials, and a security/legal system with numerous loopholes." He stresses that in this "post-Cold War world", anti-West and anti-capitalist entities such as Al Qaeda have focused their fight on the United States alone, concentrating their efforts against the world's "only superpower." He insinuates that those involved in the attacks on the Prime Minister's residence might have a grudge against the government of Lesotho (GOL) because of their belief in a democratic system of government, and their status as a "lackey" of "their big brother America." He states: "Lesotho's receiving of the \$2.5 (sic) billion aid package from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) which is a body in the US that promotes democracy has not gone down well with some of these terrorist groupings." (Note: Lesotho is receiving MCC funding in the amount of \$362.6 million and it appears likely that the newspaper's misinformation resulted from confusing the dollar amount and the rand amount. End note.)

¶ 13. In answer to the title question of whether or not Lesotho is fertile breeding ground for terrorists, the author gives a resounding yes. According to him, anyone can get in, and this is evidenced by the incursion - all the way up to the gates of the Prime Minister's residence - of South African and Mozambican "terrorists" on the night of April 22 (ref A). He then mentions the fact that citizens of Lesotho and Swaziland can no longer travel freely to Britain, and asserts that the CIA, MI5, and others have found international terrorists and Al Qaeda operatives traveling under Lesotho passports. He also mentioned that one Al Qaeda operative of Sudanese origin - associated with the 9/11 attacks, and eventually imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay - had worked for one of Lesotho's flying services as a pilot. According to the article, high ranking government officials are aware of passport and document fraud facilitated by bribery with the Home Affairs department, and Foreign Minister Tsekoa commented that both the GOL and the South African government are prioritizing these border problems and said that "very soon the whole cacophony of illicit crossing will come to an 'ungentle' stop."

¶ 14. Finally, he blames a string of unsolved cases for damaging the credibility of Lesotho's judicial system, stating that one of those cases involved an American citizen. (Note: The murdered Clinton Foundation employee he referred to was not an American citizen.) In regard to that death he says: "When it comes to the death of their citizens Americans especially the CIA have a very long memory." He says that when a terrorist finds out about Lesotho's flawed security and legal systems, and know that they can enter the country easily, they deduce that they can "come into the country, fulfill whatever nefarious mission they are on and walk away freely without apprehension." He doesn't think that the police would catch them, and if they did, he feels certain that the sentence would be light, if not non-existent. He mentions a case of sedition where the defendant was sentenced to pay a \$20 fine.

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¶ 15. Comment: Post agrees with the journalist on many points. The borders are porous, documents are not secure, and the justice system is flawed. However, facing an HIV/AIDS pandemic (the third highest infection rate in the world), unemployment of about 50%, and extreme poverty for much of the population, the GOL is strapped for money, and it is likely that the GOL would need help from other countries if it decided to really tackle the border issue and crack down on illegal entry. End comment.

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A game of connect the dots: Is this a repeat of 2007?

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¶ 16. Some Embassy sources are concerned at what looks like a return to the apparently random searches of opposition leaders' homes that was a prevalent feature of police action in the aftermath of the 2007 elections in the kingdom. The two ABC supporters mentioned in the Lesotho Times headline were arrested in their homes last Friday. (Note: The All Basotho Convention (ABC) is the main opposition party in Lesotho, the only real contender against the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) party. End Note.) According to the paper, Dan Masia was at his home at 6:30 am in the morning when six armed Special Support Unit (SSU) police officers arrived, wearing civilian clothes, saying that they were searching for illegal arms. Although they did not present a search warrant, Masia allowed them to search his home.

¶ 17. Six heavily armed officers had appeared earlier, at 4:45 am Friday morning, at the home of Katiso Phasumane. This group of officers did have a search warrant. Following the searches, both men were questioned as to their whereabouts leading up to the April 22 attacks, and officers insinuated that Phasumane and Masia might have been involved. The SSU Station Commander responded to the paper's report by stating that "the two had been arrested because their names kept coming up during the interrogation of other suspects connected to the attack on the

State House."

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Some suggest that the ruling party is responsible for the attacks  
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¶ 8. In a surprise move, Ratabane "Candy" Ramainoane, the editor-in-chief and sole proprietor of a local weekly Sesotho-language newspaper, "MoAfrika", argued that the responsibility for the April 22 attacks lies with Prime Minister Mosisili himself. Ramainoane, a strong supporter of the LCD and known foe of opposition leader Tom Thabane, stated in "MoAfrika's" April 24 issue, "Mosisili o jeoa ke linta tsa kobo ea hae", directly translated: "Mosisili is being bitten by lice from his own blanket". In other words, "the Prime Minister has dug his own grave."

¶ 9. Ramainoane added that although Lesotho citizens have different theories about the April 22 attacks, the general feeling is that Mosisili invited the South African army to take charge of the country's security in 1998, and therefore, foreign troops got to know all the Lesotho Defense Force (LDF) secrets, strategic bases, and what kind of weapons they carry. According to Ramainoane, rumors are floating that Mosisili's ex-right hand man, who has since left the government, still has a loyal following in the security establishment. (Comment: Ramainoane does not mention by name the "ex-right hand man", but the general public is aware that he is referring to opposition leader Thabane. End comment.) The editor further claims that the afore-mentioned individual has followers in the LDF, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service, the National Security Service, and others. Ramainoane advises Mosisili that officers in the security service who are still close to Thabane, are telling the Prime Minister lies, and should be gotten rid of.

¶ 10. Comment: By urging Mosisili to throw away his blanket, it seems that Ramainoane is advocating for a cabinet reshuffle and the appointment of new heads of the disciplined, security and correctional services, who would be loyal to the LCD and not to Thabane. End Comment.

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Are old friends being used against the ABC?  
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¶ 11. The Lesotho Monitor May 7 headline reads: "Imigris renounce Tom Thabane." Tom Thabane is the leader of the ABC party. The three imigris mentioned in the headline used to work for him as bodyguards. The trio fled Lesotho in 2007 in fear of retaliation for their alleged role in post-election violence, including attacks on ministers' homes, and they returned to

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Lesotho just weeks before the April 22 attacks. On May 4, the three men called a press conference to vent their frustration at not having received more support from Thabane during their exile (ref B). The three men scoffed at the idea that Makotoko Lerotholi, one of the only publicly-named suspects in the April 22 attacks, could have been involved. According to them, Lerotholi was much too ill to take part in such a plot.

¶ 12. Comment: Rumors about Lerotholi's involvement in the assassination attempt appear to have been confirmed by his recent arrest in South Africa (ref A). End Comment.

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The Lesotho Monitor ponders attacks; urges government to act  
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¶ 13. In other stories, the Monitor reported that the two suspects held in custody in Lesotho in connection with the April 22 attacks have been remanded to custody until their cases are

heard on May 18 by the Maseru Magistrate. The two applied for bail, which was denied for reasons of national security. The report indicates that investigations have still not revealed the exact number of arms and ammunition still missing from the LDF armory. Army spokesmen say they are puzzled at how the attackers gained access to the armory, and investigations are still ongoing. In reaction to the attacks and the arrest of the two suspects (one from Mozambique and the other from South Africa), Lesotho has welcomed police officers from both Mozambique and South Africa, as well as officers from the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) based in France. In a separate article, the High Commissioners from Mozambique and South Africa pledge that their countries are committed to assisting Lesotho with its investigations, saying that anyone who is involved with the attacks should be arrested.

¶14. Three op-ed pieces in the same edition condemn the attacks, bemoaning the ease with which residents and non-residents of the Kingdom have recently taken up guns to try to settle some sort of score. One editorial insinuates that a politician must be behind the April 22 attacks. It also refers to the subsequent and unrelated killing of Member of Parliament and political party leader Motikoe (ref C), stating that: "However one may be aggrieved or feel wronged, it is always better to pause and act from logic and not too much emotion. It is difficult to do so, but life is too precious to erase it on the spur of the moment."

Another editorial lists several high-profile unsolved murder and attempted murder cases and express regret that Lesotho rarely solves these politically-motivated crimes. The author states that Lesotho is "becoming a mafia kingdom with godfathers and what have you." They encourage the government to redouble their efforts to identify and punish perpetrators.

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Popular paper covers imigris and the "attack" on Lesotho High Commission  
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¶15. The most widely-read and distributed local paper, "Public Eye", published a story on May 8 about the imigris' return. In it, Tom Thabane, the ABC leader, refuses to respond to the trio's accusations. He says: "It only shows to what extent we have come as a nation in terms of moral degeneration." The article recalls the reasons that lead up to the groups' self-imposed exile, and mentioned that though they have never been charged with a crime, they are required to report to the police daily. According to the paper, the Assistant Commissioner of police requested this condition for the imigris own safety. A comic in the May 8 edition depicts two of the imigris holding a press conference. One says: "It's so nice to be back home." The other: "Life in exile was a nightmare!" Beside them is the Police Headquarters and a member of the Lesotho Mounted Police Service saying: "We have never been interested in you." An accompanying editorial encourages the government to charge the men or leave them alone.

¶16. Another article in the paper reported the Foreign Minister's account of an attack against the Lesotho High Commission Residence in Pretoria. (Note: Embassy Maseru had learned days prior to the May 8 edition of the paper that in fact, no attack had happened. Embassy sources revealed that a guard at the residence had injured himself when he accidentally discharged his weapon. End Note.) Other articles in the paper covered the aftermath of the April 22 attacks on the Prime Minister. In one, the LCD National Executive Committee said that the attacks were an attempt to "eliminate our leader and to plunge the country into bloody instability." The article also

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repeated the governments' claim that the attacks are likely the acts of the same people who attacked ministers' residences in ¶2007. The LCD National Committee thanked "all who clamped down on the malicious attempt, including the army, the police and the intelligence officers." Another article carried a large photo

of the bullet-ridden taxi which had been hijacked by the attackers. It recapped the events of April 22 and reviewed the two suspects' first appearance in court.

¶17. The May 8th edition of "Public Eye" carried a two-page center spread entitled: "Govt's coup claims leave many questions unanswered." The paper, often openly critical of the ruling party, derides the government's theories on the attack and its choice of suspects. It states that in the case of prime suspect Lerotholi, "the police have still not given identity of informants who allegedly sighted" him, "nor are they making any claim of first-hand sighting of the man by their own operatives." They end the article by returning to the sticky issue of negotiations following the 2007 elections, stating that, "We now know that the Masire process was subverted by the ruling party and government telling the mediator that he was no longer welcome to convene a final all-party workshop on the seats controversy." The paper invites the public to "judge for themselves" the government's motivation in inviting the media to defend democracy and kick-starting a series of nationwide rallies about the subject.

¶18. Finally, a letter to the editor by a local citizen gets right to the point that the Embassy has also been asking itself. Entitled "Who would benefit if Mosisili dies?" the letter makes the point that: "Only a fool can believe that Lesotho's opposition, or any opposition anywhere in this world would benefit anything from the assassination of the Prime Minister. In fact, they would be the most stupid opposition to ever harbor such thinking. Opposition can only benefit from a fully-fledged coup that replaces the cabinet, not a single member of the cabinet since they can only replace the government and not an individual. If a prime minister dies today, only members of his party would benefit as he would be replaced by a member of the party, not anybody from the opposition.

NOLAN